

Saudi Public Opinion:

A Rare Look

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Jan 27, 2010

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Brief Analysis

What issues are of concern to ordinary Saudis? How does the average citizen view the state of the domestic economy? What are the prevailing public attitudes toward religious extremism? As in most countries, long-term stability in Saudi Arabia is ultimately dependent -- to one degree or another -- on popular acceptance of the current system. Even in the short term, the Saudi government, while far from democratic, is no doubt sensitive to social crosscurrents and diverse reactions to its initiatives. As a result, understanding Saudi public opinion is an important part of gauging the country's likely future direction. Opinion polls, however, are almost unknown in the kingdom, and anecdotal or indirect measures of these very delicate subjects are notoriously unreliable.

To help remedy this analytical deficiency, the following paragraphs present a rare data-based perspective on current political and social issues in Saudi Arabia, as viewed by that kingdom's own citizens. This survey reveals a moderately satisfied public -- but one that is also concerned about economic conditions. More surprising, it shows clearly that many Saudis are willing to express concerns about corruption and religious extremism. Most also want new political steps such as local elections -- but, again contrary to some Western misconceptions, this dimension of public life is not nearly as high on their agenda as other issues.

These findings are based primarily on a unique data set obtained in November 2009 by Pechter Middle East Polls, a new, Princeton-based private research organization. The data emerged from a survey conducted by a highly qualified regional commercial firm that polled a representative sample of 1,000 Saudis in the three major urban areas of Jeddah, Riyadh, and Dammam/al-Khobar. Other findings from this survey, focusing on foreign policy issues, were previously reported in PolicyWatches #1618 ("[Saudi Public Backs Iran Sanctions but Split on Military Action \(/templateC05.php?CID=3160\)](/templateC05.php?CID=3160)") and #1614 ("[Polling Saudis and Egyptians: Iran, Jihad, and the Economy \(/templateC05.php?CID=3156\)](/templateC05.php?CID=3156)").

Mixed Views on the Economy

As of late November 2009, urban Saudis were divided about whether the kingdom was moving in the right direction (54 percent) or the wrong direction (39 percent) On economic issues, they were significantly more pessimistic about their individual situations: 40 percent said their personal economic prospects had declined over the past year,

compared with 36 percent who said they had improved; 23 percent saw no change. Looking ahead, only a quarter expected economic improvement over the next year, while half predicted their situation would stay the same.

Views on personal security were similarly mixed. Just under half of the respondents said they felt "more secure" in the past year than previously, but an equal proportion disagreed (only 6 percent said they did not know or refused to answer the question).

Younger Saudis More Optimistic

On two of these bellwether questions, respondents who were 18-24 years old (a group that comprises nearly a quarter of the kingdom's total adult population) voiced somewhat more positive views than those in the 55-and-over age bracket (around 10 percent of all adults). For example, 59 percent of the younger group said that Saudi Arabia is moving in the right direction, compared to 51 percent of the older group. Similarly, 39 percent of the younger respondents believed that their economic situation had deteriorated over the past year, compared to 46 percent of the older group.

Jeddah Residents More Disgruntled, but Not Economically

The question of Saudi Arabia's overall direction generated significant and surprising regional differences as well. In Riyadh and Dammam/al-Khobar, solid majorities viewed the kingdom's current course favorably. Responses from Jeddah, however, indicated more popular discontent: a narrow majority voiced a negative view of the country's direction. But these regional differences do not correspond to economic perceptions. In fact, Jeddah residents were marginally less likely than others to say that their personal economic situation had worsened over the past year and just as likely to expect improvement in the near future.

Most See Corruption as a Serious Problem

Overall, a majority (63 percent) of the respondents said that corruption is a serious issue in Saudi Arabia. In fact, when asked in a separate, open-ended question to name the kingdom's "most serious" problem, one-fifth cited corruption -- more than the proportion who named unemployment, and not far behind those who said inflation. In Jeddah, however, fewer than half (42 percent) of the respondents saw corruption as a major problem, compared to large majorities in both Riyadh (74 percent) and Dammam/al-Khobar (85 percent).

Nevertheless, as noted above, people in the latter two cities are somewhat more likely than those in Jeddah to be satisfied with the country's overall direction. Perhaps their citizens see some of Saudi Arabia's problems as bad but getting better, while Jeddah residents are less concerned but also less likely to anticipate much improvement.

Concerns about Religious Extremism

Just over half (54 percent) of urban Saudis said that religious extremism is a serious problem in their country, with one-quarter subscribing "strongly" to that view. These responses should be considered in the context of another, previously reported finding from this survey: one-fifth of urban Saudis expressed some support for al-Qaeda.

Unlike other issues, opinion on religious extremism was quite uniform across the three survey areas and, more surprisingly, across different age cohorts and educational categories. Gender, however, provided an interesting demographic variation: 48 percent of male respondents believe that religious extremism is a serious problem, but among women, that figure rose modestly to 59 percent.

Resumption of Municipal Council Elections

In 2005, Saudi Arabia held its first citywide (though male-only) elections for municipal councils in the three cities polled in this survey, with membership to be evenly divided henceforth between elected and appointed officials. A second round of elections, due in 2009, was postponed. In this survey, half the urban public said that those elections

should have been held on time; a third disagreed. Moreover, two-thirds said local elections should now be held by 2011.

Asked what role these municipal councils should play, most respondents cited either infrastructure or economic improvements. Half said that they would approach the council about local issues such as road repair or sanitation services.

These numbers must be put in the context of other popular priorities, however. When asked in an open-ended fashion what the top national priorities should be, none of the respondents named elections or democracy. Instead, economic and social issues, including corruption, were the overwhelming favorites. Similarly, when asked what the United States should do in the region, only 13 percent cited democracy promotion as their first or second choice -- far more named economic support or action on various Arab-Israeli issues.

Perceptions of the Majlis al-Shura

Asked about their country's Majlis al-Shura, the appointed national consultative council, 70 percent of urban Saudis said that they were aware of it. Among that group, about half said the council's main role lies in the legal realm, with about one-quarter each citing economic or social functions. One in ten respondents who were aware of the council either did not know its function or said that it has no real role and is just a formality.

Policy Implications

These unusual yet highly credible findings suggest a manageable public opinion climate inside Saudi Arabia, even in regard to potentially volatile domestic issues. This is encouraging news, in terms of U.S. interests in Saudi stability as well as, perhaps, Riyadh's flexibility on some controversial topics of common concern.

At the same time, the climate for internal reform appears permissive. Saudis seem generally accepting of the gradual pace of reform so far, and appear predominantly favorable toward modest measures in that direction in the years ahead. And although they want new local elections within the next few years, they are hardly clamoring for them.

One issue that stands out as potentially problematic is corruption. Regional variations notwithstanding, concern about this subject registered at relatively high levels.

David Pollock is a senior fellow at The Washington Institute, focusing on the political dynamics of Middle Eastern countries. He is the author of the Institute's 2008 Policy Focus [Slippery Polls: Uses and Abuses of Opinion Surveys from Arab States. \(/templateC04.php?CID=290\)](#) ❖

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